

H.E.A.T. accepts more families

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ST. GEORGE - More families can come home to warm houses after the federal government distributed \$450 million for heat assistance programs on Thursday.

Utah's Home Energy Assistance Target Program, known as H.E.A.T., received \$3,745,228, according to a press release from the program.

The funding is an addition to the program's \$14 million budget, according to the press release.

"The people who come to see us are working, but they just don't make enough money. They have trouble paying outrageous rents, let alone power," said Sharon Long, H.E.A.T. program supervisor for Washington, Iron, Beaver, Garfield and Kane counties.

H.E.A.T. provides winter utility payment assistance to low-income households, and aims to help the disabled, elderly and families with preschool-age children, according to the program's Web site.

H.E.A.T. serves about 31,000 families each year, said Sherman Roquero, manager for the State Energy Assistance and Lifeline Office, a division of the State Department of Community and Culture.

However, the program saw a decline in the number of applicants for this winter, Roquero said.

Statewide, there were 2,000 fewer applications than last year, and fewer people from Southern Utah applied for H.E.A.T. assistance, he said.

Long said she does not know why fewer people have applied.

"I know that not everybody moving to St. George is independently wealthy," she said.

Roquero said even though Southern Utah residents experience mild winters compared to the state's northern residents, most still have heating expenses.

He said he believes that pride may also play a role in the decreasing number of applicants.

"Some people, like those who went through the Great Depression Era, are self-sufficient and won't apply," Roquero said. "We try to tell them they'll have more money for food and medications."

To receive funding from H.E.A.T., households must be 125 percent below the federal poverty level, Roquero said.

To qualify, a single person must make less than \$1,064 each month, a household of two must make less than \$1,426 each month and a family of four would have to make less than \$2,151 each month.

H.E.A.T. deducts medical and work expenses from applicants' overall income, he said.

"As long as you are having to pay some kind of energy costs, and you meet the income guidelines, you are eligible," Roquero said.

Funding is distributed to the applicants' gas or electric accounts, Long said.

Utah residents have until spring to apply for H.E.A.T. assistance for the 2007-2008 winter, Roquero said.

To schedule an appointment at the St. George H.E.A.T. office, call 652-9643.
